



SurveyMonkey

SMART SURVEY DESIGN

This guide provides information on writing successful and effective survey questions, creating survey flow and layout, calculating response rates, tips for increasing response rates, and the pros and cons of online surveys. (Plus an appendix of links and works cited for additional help in survey design.)

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 - ◆ Dynamic
 - ◆ Ability to track
 - ◆ Quick response time
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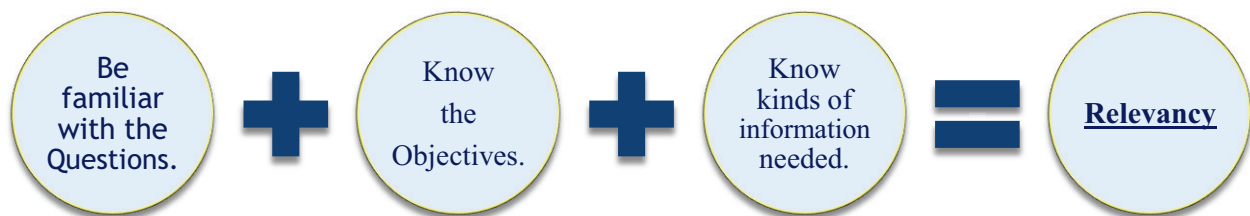
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I: INTRODUCTION: RELEVANCY AND ACCURACY

Writing solid and unbiased surveys may seem like a daunting and unapproachable task. However, it is not as overwhelming as one may think! Creating well structured, simply written questions will help in collecting valid survey responses. An important goal as a survey author is to construct clear, direct questions and answers using the language that survey participants will understand. While there are no set rules on the wording of these survey questions, there are some basic principles that do work to improve the overall design. The intent of this guide is to provide tips on utilizing those principles for constructing effective surveys that collect accurate and valid data.

Relevancy and **accuracy** are two ideals that encompass the main outcome of creating reliable surveys. These two principles work together to write effective survey questions. To achieve relevancy, keep the following factors in mind (Iarossi 2006, 27):



The kinds of questions a survey author should create are based on two things: the **objectives** of the survey and the **information** to be collected. A goal of the author is to then turn those research objectives into a set of “information requirements.” From here, one can create questions that will produce that information (Brace 2004, 11-12). An **accurate** survey is one where the questions collect the data in a reliable and valid way. If the questions ask respondents things they do not know, then it can result in inaccurate data. To enhance the accuracy of respondents’ answers, take into consideration the following items (Iarossi 2006, 28):

- Address the wording style, type, and question sequence.
- Make the survey interesting and notice the survey length or how long it takes to answer the entire survey.
- When designing a survey, the author should try to put him/herself “in the position of the typical, or rather the least educated, respondent.” (Moser and Kalton 1971, 320)

Some additional things to consider about the relevancy and accuracy of survey questions are the ways in which the questions are written and their overall length. Writing clear, direct, and brief questions will help the survey respondents to know exactly what you are asking. By making sure that the questions asked do not have more than one possible meaning also helps in preventing respondents' confusion. Asking sensitive questions in alternate ways may help to alleviate respondents' concerns. For example, many people may feel that income, age, lifestyle habits, etc. are personal and may not want to disclose that information. So when collecting a respondent's age, a person may be more willing to indicate what year s/he was born rather than to state an actual age. Finally, take into consideration the capability of your survey participants. Some participants may not be able to accurately answer certain questions. If you are surveying employees, perhaps they cannot recall certain details of a project carried out years ago. Or if you are surveying a consumer product, respondents may not remember specific features about it (["Survey Planning"](#)).

A. Question Intent:

Well-understood questions increase both the accuracy and frequency of survey respondents' answers. While creating survey questions, keep these two fundamental questions in mind in regards to the intent behind the questions and the data you want to collect ([Iarossi 2006, 44](#)):

- Will respondents be able to understand the question?
- Will respondents be able to answer the question?

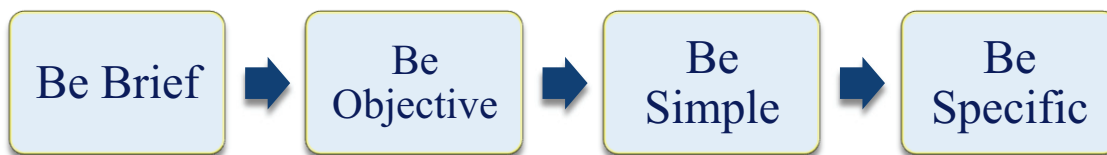
The legibility and relevancy of these questions will therefore play a key role on impacting each individual question's intent. By sticking to these three following suggestions, you may increase the accuracy and frequency of respondents' answers:

1. **Use legible questions** - Ask questions that read well and are quick and easy to answer. This may help to keep the respondents from jumping to an answer before the question is completely read. Avoid writing questions in a complex structure; sometimes the longer the list of questions/answers, the lower the quality of the data ([Iarossi 2006, 44](#)).
2. **Use relevant questions** - Make sure that all questions asked are relevant to all respondents and the survey's purpose. In addition, avoid hypothetical questions ([Iarossi 2006, 44](#)).
3. **Use painless questions** - Questions asked in your survey should require a small amount of effort to answer. Most people prefer to answer and complete surveys quickly without thinking too hard or spend a lot of time. If the survey is too long

or becomes tiresome, respondents may adopt strategies to get to the end of the survey as quickly as possible. For example, with repeated rating scale type questions, respondents may get into a pattern of response that does not reflect their actual thoughts. They may simply just click the 1st rating scale every time to answer every question and finish the survey quickly (Brace 2004, 18).

B. Constructing Good vs. Bad Questions:

Each survey question has a unique need. Because of this, there is no universal right or wrong of “question wording.” However, there are ways to construct good vs. bad ones. The following four criteria can help you when wording and structuring your questions (Iarossi 2006, 30-44):



- 1.) **Be Brief** - Keep questions short and ask one question at a time. Longer questions may quickly become confusing, thus resulting in a misread of what you are asking. *Remember: Brevity's goal is to create the shortest way to ask a question without losing its intent. It is not always about reducing the length of the question (Iarossi 2006, 30-44)!*
- 2.) **Be Objective** - As the survey designer, pay attention to the neutrality of the words. This helps to avoid unintentional violation of the survey's objectivity. Here are some tips to avoid violating the objectivity (Iarossi 2006, 30-44):
 - A. *Avoid leading questions* - Based on their content, wording, or structure, these kinds of questions may lead a respondent towards a certain answer. According to Iarossi, the following three items aid in the creation of leading questions and survey writers should always try and avoid these (33-35):
 - Failure to give equal weight to all options.
 - The actual set of options offered acts as a source of information.
 - The actual list of options provided will influence the respondents, meaning the options that appear in the beginning of a long list have the “primacy effect” and have a higher likelihood of being selected.

A good way to deter the “primacy effect” is to make the answer choices appear in a random order every time the survey opens up to a new respondent. This can be accomplished with the “randomized answers” option as a Professional subscriber in SurveyMonkey.

Example of Leading Question Bias:

Example: We have recently upgraded SurveyMonkey’s features to become a first class tool. What are your thoughts on the new site?

Replace with: What are your thoughts on the upgrades to SurveyMonkey?

- B. *Avoid loaded questions* - This type of answer bias works through emotionally charged items like words, stereotypes, or prestige images. When creating the survey, avoid words that may “cater to the respondent’s ego or contort the respondent’s pride.” This may result in pushing the respondent towards a particular answer ([Iarossi 2006, 30-44](#)).
 - C. *Avoid built in assumptions* - When creating survey questions, avoid questions that assume the respondent is familiar with the specifications asked within the questions ([Iarossi 2006, 30-44](#)).
- 3.) **Be Simple** - The survey should use language that is simple in both words and phrases. The following are some helpful points to remember for question simplicity ([Iarossi 2006, 30-44](#)):
- Use words and expressions that are simple, direct, and familiar to all Respondents.
 - Avoid technical jargons or concepts.
 - Adopt the same definitions throughout the form.
 - Avoid Negative or Double Negative Expressions. The use of universal words or “absolutes” like “always” or “never” may cause the respondents to avoid answering a question. These tend to extend the question to an extreme. In addition, try not to use words such as “only” or “just.” These could be perceived negatively worded by the respondents (“[Writing Survey Questions](#)”).
 - Avoid using Double-Barreled questions. Double-Barreled questions split questions into more than one part, idea or meaning. The answer choice for each part might have separate meanings to the ideas presented within the one question. These may lead the respondent to answer only one aspect of it; ultimately leading him/her to fail in answering both aspects of the question. (“[Writing Survey Questions](#)”).

Example of a Double-Barreled Question:

Example: “How useful do you find SurveyMonkey’s Help Center Topics and the email support center?”

Replace with:

Question 1: “How useful do you find SurveyMonkey’s Help Center Topics?”

Question 2: “How useful do you find SurveyMonkey’s email support?”

- 4.) **Be Specific** - Ask precise questions. Avoid things that are too general, too complex or undefined. Stay away from using words like “often,” “usually,” “generally,” etc. Each person’s thought process is different and some people may infer a different meaning. “Often” to one person may be once or twice a week and to someone else it could be a few times a month. Do not use abbreviations and spell words out when necessary so it will not lead to potential confusion for the respondents (Iarossi 2006, 30-44).

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